

Squandered

Stories

Matt O'Connor-Mattila

For Annie

*Your initials are MOM.
Just write everything LOVE, MOM.*

So I did.

Soft Noises

They were always fighting. A good son has to say that he remembers happy moments, and I know some are there. But I wasn't a peacemaker. I was too young. I tried not to make him mad, but that didn't matter. He always found a way.

My mother explained it once that he had a lot of anger built up in him that he didn't know how to deal with. Simply put he had to bring it home. A brooding mass of a man tall and imposing through the door passed. The plastic bottles of sour nectar waited in a drawstring bag. From the living room corner came the grumbles under bleary eyes and sour breath. He escalated his own misery. Everything had to be his way. My mother was incredibly attentive to him. She made sure to keep us happy. But how content he looked didn't matter. Even at night when I'd hear their bed shake I knew he was waiting. The sunlight streaming through the blinds the next morning made him angry. The Christmas music knocked him out in his chair. The house was quiet and it woke him up.

He wouldn't act out in public but I could still see it. He waited until he was alone with us. He always found a way.

Sometimes I'd come downstairs and she would be in tears with red marks splotching her skin and he'd be stalking the room from one end to the other. Making attention to myself was a no-go. I could only make things worse so I'd retreat behind a closed door. One time though I was tired of all the yelling and sobbing and bodily commotion from downstairs and found her struggling against his arm while he raised the other one and I jumped under him and tried to pry her out one sausage finger at a time. All my frantic movement and hoarse screaming was enough to distract him at least and she unbundled herself and stepped away. I

remember the shift in her eyes when she looked across me and up to him. The fire could've struck us down then. We kneeled there in the middle of the floor and she hushed me. He looked down at us in a typical pity/disgust and sauntered out. He didn't say a thing to me. I wasn't a target. I was only an inconvenience.

Late summer's when it happened. My room was above the kitchen - I had a fan going in the window and it gave off a whirring noise that muted their commotion. Their words stayed muffled between the walls and the flowered air met the house through the window but the sun burned a bright fluorescent dawn and I knew they were at it. It dulled and flurried and they shouted and stopped and started again but eventually the house had one big shake and I couldn't ignore it anymore. I cracked the door open super slow. She called me from the bottom of the steps.

"We're okay," she said. "Something fell over."

I retreated behind the door. I heard her step out the kitchen and walk around the yard close to the house. She moved like she was planning a surprise. I wanted her to let me know it was all okay. The silence was long and hollow and inescapable.

"Want to come help me?" she called up.
Maybe I was in trouble. Maybe she heard me snooping. Maybe she was hurt.

He was face down on the kitchen floor. His dark hair sticking out the tarp was soft and shined with sweat. My mother stood at the sink, her arms crossed, her shirt torn, the redness around her eyes fading to black and blue.

"We need to take him outside," she said, "so he can get better."

I'd seen my father passed out before. Usually in his chair, never on a floor like this, never in the middle of an argument. He was in the same clothes as last night just wrapped in a blue tarp and some twine I recognized from out back. She showed me how to hold his ankles. Even half his size she was strong enough to hold his arms and brush the door open to the porch. She kept her nervous eyes on me, made sure I never strayed far from the task at hand, never had much time to think. Made sure I was listening to her. Whenever I tried to ask a question - how long he'd been asleep, why he needed to wear this, if she was okay - my mother said she'd explain later. He was heavy.

The two of us tottered down the grassy slope at the edge of the woods. The trees enveloped us. The house and soon the street faded through the branches. We stopped at a small clearing in a bracket of trees. We didn't say any words. He lay there in his blue plastic suit. She dug until the hole looked deep enough and my mother stooped down and rolled him in. New tears began as she shoveled dirt down on him. Her desperation was palpable and indescribable and I was in a frenzy now and picking up fresh earth with my bare hands and dropping it in and right when the sun was high and hot and bright my mother and I stood beside a spot of dirt in the woods roughly man-sized with some leaves and twigs sprinkled on. Then we cried, her and me, alone in that impermeable forest, and she kissed my head and kept telling me how sorry she was.

They came knocking, of course, not long after. She told them he was away on business. No, we hadn't heard from him. They acted like they knew us, could read right through us, knew all our terrible secrets, but soon, as my mother explained it, he was declared missing and time had to pass. For the longest while, even after we moved out of that house, I believed it myself. Even

in the dreams where I was in bed and he dug himself out of that hole to walk through the house, smelling up the hallways with pine cedar and cheap whiskey. But every morning I woke up and he was gone. My mother cooked more. No one in the house ever yelled again.

It took them long enough, didn't it? His eyes were growing plants by the time they dug up the place. I'm sure he fought with them on the way up. He always loved those woods.

This testimonial repeats nothing not already stated by the defendant. I send this with full knowledge of its consequences and live ready to face them. I buried my father behind the house. I did it because I was a child. Now, as an adult, I would stand across from her as the tile soaked him up. Someone would call. I would stay with my mother and watch them bring him away in a green zippered bag. I want to hold her and tell her I understand.

QUARTERS

[for Sarah Kane]

Note: All names are redacted.

A house like any other. A room basement level, a window underground. A lamp on improvised carpet, a bureau to hold clothes inside, a couch with two cushions, a bed in the sunlight. A door with a lock that has no key. Three roommates, one house, one act.

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Did it hurt?

[A pause.].

Did I hurt you?

[A pause.]

You know what you did.

I said I'm sorry.

Sorry isn't enough.

[A pause.].

It isn't what I asked for.

[A pause.]

Well what am I supposed to do? Why would you go to HIM about it? Why did you have to tell on me? Why did you have to be such a switch snitch bitch!

You don't really talk like that.

[A pause.]

There's no need to talk like that. I'm here to explain it to you.

What's there to explain?

You raped me.

You think that's rape? My father would stand in the shower with me and watch me suds up till I was 12 years old. I saw it. I saw his stiffy.

I'm sorry. But this isn't about you.

[A pause.]

You raped me. I don't know how to say it anymore. I don't know how to describe what they said through the walls. I need to dig deeper. I need to dig my way out. Scatter. Multiply. Chain shot through the riggings. Can't give up the ship. The fish are waiting to eat me.

.

It's time to quit the esoterics. Instead we start from nothing. We build our way back. The path to freedom is fought through the fog of daily annoyance and lost privilege. Why remember what happened? We can sit here and pontificate all day but that alarm is bound to go off. Needs will arise. Other stories wait. But the process has begun. A routine needs to be set, of course, in order to continue to make progress and free yourself of a prison in your own making—a swamp of tidbits and sunken ideas in which not only would you drown but your body could be preserved forever, to be dug up six thousand years later from the peat and named Phil because your notebooks were filled with a handwriting a team of specialists will spend countless man-hours trying to decipher, until one genius realizes that it counts as English and you were just an idiot.

The problem I face now is there's so many ways I want to tell this story. I HAVE to tell this story. Why? Haven't I exorcised it enough? For what reason could dragging the narrative through dead mud bring myself any peace? All I've done is torture myself for the past four months (3/26) and make complimentary notes and starts and tries and re-dos here and there but nothing feels right.

It's still too uncomfortable. It doesn't need to be the centerpiece on a great table served to the consuming public. I know there's more to do. That isn't the problem. The problem is I'm entangled in a web of my own design. The lack of routine, the sense of lost discipline, the stress of just being alive every day is enough to throw me off whenever I think I've gotten going again. No wonder a "draft" has produced tangents in the middle of the page like this. You were lost somewhere you never wanted to be. What I need before anything, before I move on, is an edit.

No. I need to keep writing. I need to sort myself out. I need the time to make the space to sort myself out here on simulated paper.

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What's he doing down there?

[A pause.].

He's afraid.

Oh please. What could he be afraid of?

An interrogation.

He scoots around like he can't be seen.

No wonder the cats hate him.

They hunt him now.

[A pause.]

He sleeps too much.

He stays up all night out of his head on dirt weed and stalks the house jumping shadow to shadow to fulfill self-assigned chores.

Like what? Is he cleaning doorknobs again?

No. He cleans anything he's touched.

[A pause.]

He's so sneaky these days.

He runs away from us.

Won't talk. Won't socialize.

Evades questions.

He sleeps too much. Pops pills at 2 am and stares at the moving lights on screen and wonders why.

Those are his meds.

Really! I wonder if they're helping.

Nothing helps.

[A pause.]

When does he wake up.

Daytime. He hides. Hibernates.

[Lost date.]

No routine. No writing.

Bad habits.

No. No habits. Bad impulses.

Casual blatant self-destruction in the laziest most pathetic way.

Yep. No changing that.

Not if you don't like being awake.

[A pause.]

No wonder he isn't getting up.

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I need to get out of here. The pandemic isn't ending. The disease here is rampant. A fragile mind is infected by the intoxication of presence. I am a bad influence. I instigated everything he did to me. The best thing I can do is leave. But go where? I have no money. I have no job. I have no friends who could take me in. Instead it's every day and every evening that I hide and wait for

the footsteps to stop, for the voices above to pass over and return to their quiet isolation. Only then do I emerge.

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He's always been sick, hasn't he?

I've seen him cry.

[A pause.]

He was always the first to break. As a small child he couldn't tie his shoes and his uncle was trying to teach him—

Go on.

—and he started crying because he was all frustrated and the uncle couldn't settle him down so the uncle called him a sissy and a wimp and a faggot because he couldn't stop crying.

How did he learn to tie his shoes?

If he did he never learned right.

He taught himself.

Something like that.

Fucking left-handers.

He was always the first to break. One time out camping some of his parent's friends had a fight and it spilled into the doorway of the camper and he couldn't handle it and he broke down and started wailing (12 years old, mind you, a growing boy) and the aunt had to stop him and hold him by the shoulders and tell him to calm down and everything's alright but still he wouldn't stop so she slapped him to try and get him back to his senses.

Did it work?

Oh please. He tired himself out. His breath got all shuddery and everyone thought he might pass out. The belligerent friend left.

No point in dealing with a crying boy.

Exactly.

He didn't even learn to write correctly.

His handwriting has always been terrible.

He's got an uncle who's left-handed and successful.

Successful with six ex-wives.

And the uncle writes in all capitals. His mother tried to teach him to do that but he didn't like that.

[A pause.]

Why?

Writing in all capitals is the sign of a control freak.

Screaming on paper.

Something like that.

[A pause.]

All he writes these days is nonsense.

If he writes at all.

If he writes again.

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Acceptable forms of self-harm: acne excoriation. Hair pulling (body). Discreet, hidden, deniable. Nail-biting. Body hair removal. Zit bursting.

Unacceptable forms of self-harm: Loud, confrontational, Altering. Cutting. Hair burning. Hair pulling. Blood and patch spots. Scar ripping. Delayed healing.

Self-harm is the smallest form of death.

How to die in the room: Slit wrists. Blood on the splattered carpet to watch unfinished paint on the walls. Hang from the rafters (punching through to expose ceiling. Loud. Intervenable). Hang from the doorknob: the prison noose. Detectable. A cheap fragile door.

An overdose on prescribed antidepressant medication is not guaranteed.

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To live and die in this room is a curse. Why do that to yourself?

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Do you see doctors?

Yes.

Do they help?

[A pause.]

I asked, do they help you?

They try.

[A pause.]

Do you help them?

[A pause.]

Do you help your doctors make you feel better?

There's only so much they can do. They can't pay my bills. They can't buy me food. They can't un-rape me.

Are you saying you should be institutionalized?

I'm saying I shouldn't be anywhere close to here. I don't want to live here anymore. There's nothing further away from living in this room than being dead.

You shouldn't talk like that.

But you don't say I shouldn't think like that.

It isn't my job to control how you think.

It's your job to accept my money and maintain the ceiling over the roof over my head and keep me stuffed down in the basement like old linens.

Don't make this about me.

He's your partner. You know what he's done. You know what he's capable of. And he's here in your house.

I told you to protect yourself.

And you kept him here. You made me vulnerable.

.

What is he saying down there?

Nothing. Leave him alone.

I've already apologized! How can I apologize more? What can I do to make him better?

Nothing. This isn't up to you.

So I'm supposed to just leave him all alone? What kind of a friend is that?

I don't think you know how to be his friend.

[A pause.]

I think you wanted something from him from day one.

That's bullshit.

No it isn't. I've seen you.

Don't accuse me like that.

I know how you followed him around the house.

I'm not allowed to wait for my friends? What else am I supposed to do? I'm supposed to just let him rot down there and be miserable?

You're supposed to give him space.

Or what?

[A pause.]

Or what.

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Symptoms: Acne excoriation (facial, controlled bursting. Dirty fingers. Exaggerated swelling. Micropustules. Blackheads. Whiteheads. Nose. Cheek. Sideburn. Ear. Chin. As necessary. Two to three times daily. In mirror, in bathroom. Scarring becomes prominent.). Contamination fears: Everything I've touched must be sprayed with Windex. No fingerprints. No germs I could carry. Augmented anxiety: Limb shaking. Racing thoughts. Quickened pulse.

Hypermilitantism. Hyperawareness. Hypervigilance. Waiting below the stairs. Counting the steps. Deliberate avoidance of co-inhabitants. Timing of movements between rooms. Increased anxiety if/when approached.

Old habits. Disturbing resurgence. Must continue to monitor.

Alone with scissors. Long hair found protruding from melanin spot on arm. Must snip. Mustn't pierce. No blood. Careful. Big scissors heavy and unwieldy. No news. Some hair remains.

The return of word-spacing. Letters, syllables, words in a phrase. Abbreviated, added to, anointed to make ten or twenty. New manipulations from words/phrases encountered in environment, from television and phone and thoughts crossing through the head like a bullet. [Monitor. M-O-N-I-T-O-R. Plus three spaces to make ten letters. Three syllables.]

Causes of compulsion: Perceived distrust ["Perceived."]. Isolation. Anxieties [threat of homelessness, lack of funds, lack of work, continued consequences of actions, general adrenaline response to sexual assault by roommate less than three months ago]. Relief by way of continued drug use. Escapism through the bowl of cannabis while he has the money for it. He hides in the backyard and tracks his movement. Nothing worse than being caught. Not if he's up early enough or late enough. Closes the front door quick enough and uses the exits closest to his room. As little footpath as possible. Everything is shameful.

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Do the meds help? They're trying. But I don't think it's working as an antidepressant. He shouldn't think like this. But I don't know how someone going through all this is supposed to think. I think he just has to make it all through. I think he needs to give himself space and forgive himself for what he's going through.

More than anything he needs to find a way out.

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Didn't he used to be a writer?

At some point he was helping me edit a friend's fantasy book.

Yeah, I remember that.

He did one chapter and then got all stuffy about "being a professional freelancer."

Wow.

Yeah he wanted to sit down with him and talk about it before he went on.

So?

I'd have to call and make them meet and I'm the one who's supposed to be editing it.

Then why aren't you?

I don't have the time.

Is he writing about us?

I doubt it.

Yeah. I doubt he's writing much of anything.

.

[The wall stood her down. She collected the paint can again and let it fall to the floor with a clonk. The floor is cold and grey. The shop is empty.

"I don't know." The sound stuck in her throat, to no one in particular, voice abated in crumbs all around her. She sighed and found it again.

"Muriel?" His voice said. She turned to face him. And again, nothing. Bare white wall. Work to be done, at some point, that he can't get through now. Maybe in heaven every project can be done in the space of a day.

Maybe the boys could help?

Where were they? Oh, gone now. Cincinnati and Omaha. Jobs and wives. How long now? Best not think...

Bare white splattered wall. Refurbished plywood. She was here when it went up! No insulation then. No insulation then.

"Muriel, you need to move."

Dotting around, where from the voice. Why so rushed? Plenty of time. Perhaps best to check in the tea.

"Fore!"

She waited.

Bang. The vibration all through the house and resonating through her flesh. Her old bones shook, a jump to the pulse, an earthquake through the whole world.

The wall was cracked now. Big ball of metal piercing through it. Nervous glittering grey eyes around it. Yellow bucket heads. It pulled back and collapsed the splinters and sheds and rot recycled through an incalculable brown. An incredible feat of engineering and Muriel at the sight of it.

Muriel saw it go through. The whole space shattered. The tea rotted through. She stood aside and laughed. The workmen scratched their heads. Why did she insist on supervising?]

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Really it was nothing good. But that doesn't matter. At least he was doing something.

Blank pages only mock you if you let them.

Cleanliness is next to holiness. Bleach is the nectar. A daily cleansing ritual that stings the pores and claws at the nostrils. A natural baldness: touch it as little as possible. Nothing need grow again.

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[The floor of the necropolis opens and our hero tumbles through. The ash zones are beyond saving. The salvos are beyond repair. Spraying could never jostle the polluted urban zones. The population has dwindled. There is no hope of recovery. Maggots fight back. The bundles of flesh awaiting them lay in heaps on a colorless floor. The heat is overwhelming as he lands the spray in hand. The flies feel him land but they don't stir from their feast. The sweat falls in his helmet. He readies the canister. He readies the mic. He points the nozzle at one torso in particular. The maggots crawl white in all directions, cover the surface.

"That one assaulted me!" he says to no one in particular. A burst of blue liquid and the body is doused in Windex. The flies burn in effigy. Their spawn writhe on the ground but can't eat air. Our hero readies a refill and looks in all directions, at the debris from the fragile ceiling above, from rotting corpse to rotting corpse.

"Good thing I brought a refill!" he says, and watches the meter rise. "I could be here all night!" The flies know nothing. The maggots just eat.]

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Diet: disintegrating. Weight loss prominent and noticeable. Wrist circumference notable reduced to near-skeletal level. State assistance hesitant to respond. Meals consist of peanut butter slathered between slices of Wonder bread proliferated from nearby store [he is becoming weak to walk] spread using a knife smuggled from upstairs kitchen onto paper plates reused minimum of three times a day. Protein levels questionable. Calories uncalculated. Sandwich eaten in great burst of desperate energy, to sit in the gut for long period of time, to digest like a brick. Minimum three sandwiches a day. It sits in

the intestine for far too long. He's done this before, when he was a homeless teenager, and the shelter didn't offer any food that he liked. So he just ate sandwiches and fell in weight to a concerning level but he did nothing about it. Maybe he's repeating the pattern on purpose. There must be cheaper food. The loaf never lasts long enough. Soon he'll have to start st—

They have food upstairs. He could ask nicely and make himself something up there. He could be true to his "communal" [Oh please! He spends all his time in his room.] values and make something while everyone is home, as a sign of forgiveness. Status quo ante bellum. A sign of recovery.

But why eat someone else's food? He doesn't help anymore. He doesn't clean up after anyone but himself. He leaves a butter knife stolen from the kitchen down in the dark of the basement perched against a paper plate dotted with crumbs in the looming heat just waiting for bugs or who knows what maybe he'll break a window and let a bird in and it'll fly around the place and the cats will run out and the birds will peck his eyes out and now he'll be blind and bleeding on a concrete floor unable to make a fucking sandwich.

The isolation is violent. Who knows how he'll make it out.

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He's following me again.

I'll talk to him.

You already did.

[A pause.]

I need to protect myself.

You don't mean that. You shouldn't talk like that. I don't want to think about someone being hurt.

He already hurt me.

[A pause.]

He raped me.

[A pause.]

He'll do it again. If not to me than someone else. The pattern of behavior doesn't start with me.

I know. But I need the money.

I'm working on it.

But you're not working. I need rent.

I pay you when I can.

I know. But not in full. You haven't paid me in full in months. I can't bring someone else in here.

I need to leave.

Yeah.

[A pause.]

But you don't want to leave do you?

[A pause.]

Look at me. Isn't it getting better here?

No. It's damaged. I can't fix it.

You don't have to. You just have to make it. Call somebody. Make the rent.

I can't. I don't have any money.

Then you need to leave.

There. You finally said it.

I'm sorry.

He raped me and now you're kicking me out.

Stop dragging him into things. You can't pay money and if you can't pay money then you need to leave. Unless a miracle

payment falls from the sky then I need the space to find another tenant who can help around here.

Because I can't help.

[A pause.]

You can't even help yourself.

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I can't believe you're leaving us.

[A pause.]

Did you even try to stay?

[A pause.].

Oh please. Knew it. It's all my fault.

[A pause.]

Nigger-chink-spic-faggot.

Stop talking under your breath. Those words don't belong to you.

Yes they do.

No they don't. You have no right to any of it.

Yes I do. I'm a faggot. You're a faggot.

Stop talking like that. It's not nice.

We can't be gay if we aren't happy.

Doesn't mean you should use those words.

Yes it does! I'm WORSE than them.

No one those words have been applied to are bad people. The words are slurs designed to denigrate them. And you aren't reclaiming them.

I'm worse than all of them. All people are bad people.

Being any of those things doesn't make them bad.

[A pause.]

All people are worthless and stupid and do bad things.

And you say you're worse?

Yes.

Isn't that making it about you?

No.

What? Why?

Because. Because. I'm worse.

[A pause.]

You don't understand.

I'm trying to.

You're not listening to me.

Yes I am, but you're not making a lot of sense.

Yes I do. You're just not listening right.

[A pause.].

See? You just ignore me.

Don't try to guilt me into getting what you want.

[A pause.].

I'm sorry.

[A pause.].

You worry me sometimes.

Why? Why would you tell me that? What have I ever done to you?

I said what you COULD do. What, without thinking right, you could do.

I can do anything. I de-monstrab-ly unstoppable. I am the greatest. I am the Emperor Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia's rosy cheeks.

I think you need to leave my room now.

Why?

You're tired. You're not thinking straight. You need to go to bed.

No. I want to sleep here.

You're not going to do that. You're going to leave.

Oh yeah? Watch me.

We're not playing this game. I'm done with you.

Watch me. I do whatever I want. And there's nothing you can tell ----- otherwise. You Fitch snitch bitch.

[A pause.]

See? I can do whatever I want.

You shouldn't want to do any of those things.

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Have you asked your friends to help?

No one can help me.

But you've asked?

I don't like asking.

What you like is irrelevant. You need help right now.

I don't like groveling like that.

You were such a good tenant. Then you lost your job and now you're falling behind. I can't keep you afloat.

This ship sank long before I got here. You owed money on your mortgage from the beginning.

I did not.

Then why'd you tell me that?

[A pause.]

I'm sorry.

And thank you for telling me what you really think of us.

I didn't mean it. I like you guys. I really wanted to be your friend.
I wanted to look up to you.

You're an adult. Adults don't run away from their problems.

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[And then he was falling. The platform crowded with workers shrank from view and the heat grew closer. The levels shrank past him. The workers marched ahead. The warning bell could sound. He was losing track of time. It accelerated and froze all at once. Maybe one or two were brave to flick a glance at his tumbling body but none moved toward him or joined him in the tumbling blackness. He fell alone and the workers marched. He looked up even as the fires reached his back. He understood then. With or without him. There was work to be done.]

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[Knocks on door. Tries the knob.]

It's locked? What do you mean it's locked?

You don't have a key?

You know I don't have a key!

[Knocks on door.]

----! Open up in there!

Is he in there?

Where else would he be!

Hey! Open up!

How long since anyone's heard from him?

He's isolating himself.

How long.

A day?

God.

Knocks on the door.

What was his name.

[Knocks on door.]

----. You need to open the door. This is a health and safety check.

Can you hear anything?

[A pause.]

No.

[Knocks on door.]

I need to break it in.

Oh god. Please don't.

I fucking knew it. You stupid fucking kid.

Put your shoulder into it.

[Knocks on the door.]

Health and safety check!

Never mind that. Did you look through the windows?

I think he's on the couch.

Sitting up?

Laying down.

[A pause.]

[Knocks on door.]

----. You need to wake up.

Stand back.

We're all here for you.

On three.

Cheap wood it'll break easy.

One.

[A pause.]

Two.

Please open the door.

CODE 86

“The only good policeman is a dead one.” -Big Black

Through the harsh glare he can see the dust grown in corners of decrepit architecture. Dirt rot under fingernails. An immovable chair welded to a steel floor. A booming voice overhead.

-you know why you're here.-

The subject fidgets in his chair and feels no restraint. But still he knows it is impossible to leave. He wants to look up and shout but the impetus is to remain. His silence reads as acceptance. His suffering is paramount to revelation.

-you know what you've done.-

A calm voice, authority unquestioned. The blinding light clicks off. The subject is startled by the dark and his respiration augments until finally the door on the other side of the dark opens.

But still he hasn't moved.

-if you were innocent you would've moved by now.-

A big gulp down, the sweat coats his neck. The light on the other side of the door is softer and heavenly. But still he hasn't moved.

-I want a lawyer- are the subject's first words.

Silence from above. Then:

-All lawyers are busy with other clients. Please allow one to two business weeks for discussion to proceed.-

More silence. The subject shifts in his chair.

-Alternatively, you can speak aloud now of what you have done.-

It doesn't take a lot to break. For the confessions to burst forth.

Says the subject:

-What have I done? Why am I here? Have I murdered a cat?-

The hallway light beckons in silence. Says:

-You know what you've done.-

Another empty silence. The subject shifts in his chair. Looks around, at nothing, blurts out:

-So can I go? Am I being detained? Am I being detained or am I free to go?-

-You are detained for a crime you have committed.-

-But I don't know what I've done.-

-Yes you do.-

The classic back-and-forth of interrogation yields mild results. As methods go, it's often better to induce pressure and allow a subject to stir the possibilities in their mind. By cutting off all escape routes (a chair in a darkened room) except for the one way out: the open door and brightly lit corridor of confession.

The interrogator's job is to extract what the subject doesn't want to reveal, to get them to say what the interrogator wants.

Oftentimes silence is the best weapon. Desperate to fill a silence that feels accusatory and non-believing, the subject will relent and bramble out a response that they think will get them out of this stressful situation. In this specific case, the subject confessed to a murder of kittens on the roadside (unreported), a burglary on 4th Avenue, and an arson on a bank gone three days ago. By the end the subject was left a sobbing mess that had to be led out by other arresting officers as head in hands the subject went from one to the other asking if they could go home now. The answer was no. They went to a cell and sat on a bed and waited for the trial preliminary to begin some months down the line.

In short it was another success for Garrison. As a rising interrogator, his track record was unblemished. His propensity for calm and focused questioning was a stalwart for department etiquette. When someone sat in his room and the lights were off and his voice boomed through the dark the likelihood of confession remained near absolute. More than that, he was quick and efficient at what he did, extracting statements almost twice as fast as anyone else in his graduating class. Even in his mid-

thirties, a relatively young member of this division, he was gaining a reputation as a strong and reliable agent who excelled at this most important task. The confession remained the most important because the evidence came first and after. Conviction and guilt were for trial lawyers and court appearances and parole boards (several years backlogged). What mattered was results, and Garrison at his tender young age was the best at getting results.

Luckily for him the day had wound down and it was about time to go home. He switched off his microphone and stood from his desk in a hollowed-out closet, white walls and a television whose view angled over the chair. He stepped out and switched off the light. The department was sparsely populated as the night crew briefed themselves downstairs for the savagery that inevitably spurned after dark. Garrison was grateful to go home. He grabbed his coat from a hallway locker and was content to continue on when he heard his name. Garrison turned to see the Captain, of all people, a fluffy mustached veteran, a man of broad shoulder and white wispy hair and bright eyes that bore into whatever he saw. His smile was wide and cordial and Garrison met his hand with his own.

"Me and Junior are going out for a drink. Would you join us?" Garrison didn't need to think it over. To be invited for a beverage alongside the captain and his son was nothing less than an honor. Well, an honor to be invited. Immediately Garrison remembered how poorly he thought of Junior. A brash noob with a penchant for a fast mouth and flashy hands. Where he got the impulsivity was a mystery. Garrison had never met the guy. He only knew the young agent by reputation. And that could've been enough to persuade him, and yet-

If the captain was inviting him after hours, this could be a sign of burgeoning news. Perhaps a promotion was in the cards. Perhaps Garrison would move up to an administrative role, a junior one at that, but maybe his ideas for augmented interrogation could

finally be put into practice, to make the job easier. Stretching racks, snarling dogs and so forth.

So Garrison said yes and followed the captain out. They talked about the minutiae of work-incessant paperwork, the sheer levels of files required to keep the prosecution up to date on cases that had long passed their own memories, the boredom of the night shift. The captain remarked, at one point, that working the night was like war. Waiting and waiting just for something awful to happen.

-Have you served?- Garrison asked, in as innocent a tone as he could manage.

The captain laughed.

-Garrison, we ARE serving. We help this community everyday.-

The captain removed a remote from his pocket. The traffic light ahead read green. The opposing traffic screeched to a halt. The two agents passed through. The opposing daren't honk less they face potential violation for disturbing the peace.

The bar was darkly lit and cast deep into the recesses of the building. The counter sat against the left wall and protected the sole bartender and the doors to the kitchen behind. Junior had a table to himself. From the empty glass in front of him and the slouch in his shoulders he was already a few deep. He didn't even look up when the Captain and Garrison approached him, their issue boots clomping across the barewood floor. A saxophone droned from a speaker lost somewhere in the minutiae of old nautical relics: posters for travel, rope strung across ceiling corners, accented by soft blue light. The decor never made sense to the Captain but then again what the fuck did he know about decor. It was Garrison's first time here. He didn't get out much.

The Captain announced his son's name as a greeting. His son's spine barely twitched. His son didn't look up from the puddle of liquor at the bottom of a glass. He waited until the two sat, Captain taking the middle of the round booth ("best seat in the

house”) and Garrison on the other end, enough distance between to stretch comfortably.

-You ever meet someone’s eyes,- Junior began -and resent everything you see?-

Garrison was quiet and Captain took the lead.

-Now now now, son; we’re here to have a good time. Let’s keep all that work business behind us. That’s for another day.-

Junior still didn’t look up. A different service worker came by and took orders. Captain ordered a mixed drink with rum whose name shot out of his throat and over the table before Garrison could register it; Garrison a simple jack-and-coke. Still he did not know what to say. He was not expecting a fellow as bright as Junior to be so dour so early in the evening.

-As long as either of you have been on this job, you know what I see.-

And only then did the young one look up: to scan with red-scarred eyes from man to man for anything to latch onto, a twitch of sympathy, a crumb of understanding deep in the recesses of their brains.

-I see citizens incapable of fending for themselves, of protecting themselves, of giving themselves the power to live devoid of power. Every day I am called to see the most horrible, the most pathetic things, and at the end I’m supposed to clock out and leave it all behind.-

Perhaps it was a tad dark in here because only now did Garrison notice the patches on Junior’s shoulders sagged as the voice falling out of his gaping mouth. The young man was still in uniform. Not a violation, of course; for beat cops it was almost expected to bring their equipment with them everywhere. Even off-duty a beat cop could be expected to respond to the aid of another officer. Overtime, after all, accrued.

The drinks were delivered and the Captain waved the server away.

-We've all had those days,- the Captain said. -What matters more is that we return. But only-The Captain raised his drink.-after we've rested with our friends.-

The Captain looked from man to man. Garrison perked up at the idea of changing the subject. Junior's eyes swiveled to his father. His fingers closed on the glass.

-To friends.- said the Captain.

-To friends.- said Garrison.

They drank. Garrison spared some. The Captain's went down like water. Junior's barely passed his lips. He waited for the other's drinks to clang on the table again before he downed it for real this time.

-Garrison, I'm immensely proud of how you handled yourself today.- said the Captain.

-Thank you sir.-

-It can't be easy driving questions out of those people.-

Junior snarfed. The two looked at him. The acid booze smell emanated from his skin, like he was a boiling oven.

-With all the tech they give you, with your guy strapped to a chair, with you IN ANOTHER ROOM, you think your job is HARD? Were you ever even on BEAT?-

Garrison shot back -I WAS a beat cop YEARS before you!-

Slurred, Junior crossed his arms and wrinkled his lips and sat back defiant.

-If you were so good why don't you still do it? Why don't you come over sometime and teach us all a lesson?-

The Captain, whimsical, held out gentle wrinkled hands between them. Garrison had only sat up. Junior's hand was strapped to the glassware.

-And it was administrators like YOU who took our guns away. Said we couldn't be trusted with them. That too many citizens didn't like it. That EVERYTHING had to be NON-LETHAL.-

Junior laughed and no one joined him. He could feel the eyes crawling on him. His father's hands patted out caution.

-Now now boys let's keep our voices down...-

A few patrons had saddled in: a couple sat at a high table against the other wall, a few regulars dotted the bar. Heads turned to the cop table. The Captain looked out at the concerned crowd and was pleading for calm.

-You're in interrogations now because all you can do is TALK. And you think you can bear up to us?-

-I could do your job with my eyes closed- Garrison said, and that was when Junior's arm raised the glass and threw it. The glass clonked against his nose and tumbled and shattered at his feet. The pain was dull but remarkable. The Captain reached across to hold Garrison back, but Garrison was having none of this insult against his honor. He had served far too long for this loudmouth to get away with it. Garrison was already reaching across the table half blind and Junior's hand disappeared at his belt and Garrison's extended fingertip had brushed against his starched open collar when something warm and cylindrical between his legs.

Then came a flash and a bang and a scream from somewhere (him? Had Garrison ever screamed before?) and a burning pain and gasps of horror and Garrison fell to the wooden floor looking up at the snarling face of Junior who met his dimming eyes with the darkened gaze of revenge and preliminary justice.

The Captain was scrambling out of the seat.

Junior pulled his father down and away and sent him sliding over the warm corpse of his companion—a new vision burned as the Captain's legs stumbled over blood and body, sending him sprawling towards a braying crowd. Junior stood defiant as his father reached towards his own belt. Some of the crowd nearest the door started to exit and Junior knew witnesses could be interrogated.

-Luckily I have new armaments to protect the citizenry!- he cried triumphant. Reached down for a metal cylinder. Pulled a tab and sent it rolling towards the door. Bouncing as it did the grenade

sent out a sickening green fume. The people did their best to cover their mouths with whatever they had, shirt collars, napkins, but it was already in the air before they could see the green. And Junior was inoculated to the fear. His grin widened into something resembling a torn-out smile. His father tried to scramble up from the floor but his urgent breathing betrayed him.

-No saving today, Pops!-

Another cylinder left at his father's by now twitching and hysterical body: no sense left as the fear took over. The couple at the table vomited into their meals, the bile passing through the woman's delicate napkin like a projectile, the man staining black/charcoal suit and white shirt with yellow phlegm. The bartender screamed and ran for the back clutching at his ears crying out for -the noise, the noise- to end. At the bar remained one sole older woman, who sprawled across the counter exposing a darkness between her legs; she pointed towards it incessantly and cried -not here, not here- as black tears streamed over her face. But the worst was the woman at the table, who by now craned her neck back and screamed something ungodly and unwritten, before her companion vomited again down the neck of her dress and collapsed below her. Junior, of course, nodded across the barroom floor surveying citizen to citizen, subject to subject, and let them lay where they were. His father was hiding his head in the crook of his arms, his shirt stained by vomit and blood and who-knows-what, and sobbing inhumanly. His chest seemed to convulse in an entirely unique way. Perhaps his heart was giving out. Junior wondered if he had time to wait and see for sure. The green smoke broke around him, flew with the draft through this old building. He stopped at the glass door and thought about switching on the radio. But then Junior thought against it. He turned around to finish what they started.

Five Tenets of Work

1. Do not confuse selfish indifference for open hostility. You are a professional non-presence. A face with a role, an active agent with a nametag.
2. Your socks are days old but your feet are powdered daily. The pain in your feet is an illusion. There is no time to check now. You prepared as best you could.
3. How long since you felt freedom? The clocks conspire to keep you here. Even the crushing responsibility can be a relief if it's refreshing enough.
4. Recognize mercy when you get it. Even the shit stained on the wall wipes off easy.
5. Dichotomy/Mantra: The wait is permanent and the end is inevitable.

Hotel Collects Payment

“I knew it, I knew it, I knew it.
Born in a hotel room and died in a hotel room.”
-Eugene O’Neill

7 AM: Sunlight. Flight. Burning. Hotel is god. Hotel is God.
HOTEL. IS. GOD.

6 AM: Relief shows up when?? Quiet guest. Dawn slips in. Owls flock the window—conspire to overthrow. Peck peck peck at glass—rustling feathers through curtains—hasty pellets fall to carpet—beaks through bedsheets. The owls tear linens and rip pillows and expose wires. The revolt has begun in earnest. The rodents were first to go and now the larger mammals. The bathroom door opens. The phone rings.

5 AM: Locking door and scrambling across floor for cover. Owl “ambassador” waddles to hiding auditor. Talon-shadows across tile. The bathroom light inflamed. The fan never-ending. Instant efficient cross-species communication attempts. Let me out of here, says the auditor. I haven’t set up breakfast yet. Counters the owl: Man, who has brought nothing but destruction and self-interest to the world, must be the next to go. It is only logic. Only a complete vanquishing of human settlement can posit the return to symbiosis. No predator kills for the sake of killing but man. Only man takes from nature and provides nothing back. At least owls, the “ambassador” argues, regurgitate balls to be dissolved and assimilated by smaller beings. At least owls provide for their ecosystem, control populations, never hunt more than they need to. What has man done? The phone rings at the desk. The auditor begs the owl to let him answer it. The owl asks if the man can

call out to it from here. The auditor screams before the joke can land.

4 AM: Standing to stay awake/alive. Shadows wait to move at the corner of the auditor's mission. No coffee can relieve the suffocating exhaustion. The phone summons a distraction and the auditor shoots to answer it in a professional/soothing/not-rushed 4 am voice. Guest requires attention. Enhance routine: a clogged toilet at four in the morning, a disaster waiting to be encountered, an auditor resigned to lock up the desk, put up the "off assisting other guests, will be back in a moment, thank you for your continued patronage and understanding" [patronage↔understanding] sign that will stand at attention in the middle of the counter. The auditor brings several rags (they are far too gone to be called cloths) and a plunger that hides in the storage closet behind the desk. The auditor prepares for the worst. He expects nothing but derision. Surely it will be his fault this guest did not know how to flush in between bowel movements. Perhaps with luck a sharp object will allow the guest to learn how the excretory system functions. But now is not the time. A knock and an answer grumbled: a middle-aged man, of course; drunk, of course, motions to the open door, to the putrid smell beyond, to the darkness within, and the auditor enters, mask on to hide expression, to reduce himself to a nametag and a tie tucked between shirt buttons. The toilet calls him with putrid breath. The door shuts behind. The fan whirs overhead. The auditor sighs and the out-breath flashes against his cheek. The plunger dips into the water-sludge.

3 AM: Stagnation. Isolation. Memory: in old cartoons the trick of attaching top eyelid to eyebrow using clothespins. Previous experimentation proves ineffective in this reality. Caffeine supply necessary and permanently inadequate: at some point the deprivation becomes pronounced and diagnosable. The shadows have begun to vibrate with anticipation. The doorways crawl with

humanoid figures featureless save for movement and intent. No matter if the auditor knows they aren't real. There need be only a moment where they exist. That is all it takes for them to move in on him, to cut him down short mid-shift, to become a body behind a desk with a mouth agape and face pale from the unimaginable horror that this place was inescapable, that he will never be able to go home and take a nap and wake up at three in the afternoon at the latest, with texts from friends (he doesn't have anymore) wondering when he'll get his lazy (sad) bones out of bed. He will never make it to sunrise. He can't give up. The night is nearly halfway done. Soon there will be reports to write. Sheets to print and organize. An apothecary of paperwork that means nothing to him but forever a necessary requirement of the job, to be slotted in a folder and placed in a box under a desk in the back with the date and the year scrawled on it like a Sharpie gravestone, for the box to fill night by night until it too is hauled into a back room for the hypothetical time that it becomes useful as anything other than a fire hazard. The auditor must remain awake. Reports must be filed at quarter to four. A guest may require him. The auditor must remain awake. Outside it is dark.

2 AM: Traditional bar closing time, not that there's much of that these days. Liquor stores close earlier and people who travel are bound to buy intoxicants on the way and stumble through the public area in front of the desk and ask all sorts of questions, from how to get a towel (as though asking the auditor directly is such an imposition on their part that they can't ask it themselves. Perhaps their brains are being rewired by the moon again) to any news about the owls. The auditor is never caught off guard by strange/unique/mundane questions. He has been here too long. He stands behind the counter in proper corporate-mandated uniform and waits.

1AM: The night may begin to set in. Not a time to find comfort, but perhaps one to seek solace in the monotony of tasks. Preparations for audit reports are too early: better to compare the number of arrivals remaining against each other and see who can show up first. No-shows will not be marked until much later on. Some people will not show up. That is always possible. Some will stumble in and wonder why this isn't the right hotel and what the auditor can do about it. The auditor can do what he wants. Their lives sit in his hands. He is entrusted with their personal information including names and addresses and credit card numbers and not once has he exploited it for his own personal gain. He is too trustworthy to be treated differently. Perhaps that is why they trust him so much tonight. The guests who have arrived, who have passed by, have been strangely confessional, if only in increments tossed out to the side. One lady says it's a shame the United States became so car reliant in the past seventy years. One young man wonders why more people don't like mushrooms on their pizza. The young lady from earlier is wondering about the owls. Why can't she see any? Why can't she hear any? The highway is awfully quiet tonight, she reports. There must be an owl somewhere.

Midnight: Witching hour. Well, the auditor has been here an hour. Enough time to settle in and predict through experience and instinct what the night has in store. So far a slow and tepid affair. Time enough to put on songs he's already heard, slow romantic melancholy things to play only for himself. The calls are standard and efficient. The same answers a million times. Check-in began at 3. Check-out is at 11. Ask nicely and maybe you can stay a little longer. Don't ask nicely and perhaps the auditor, asleep in a stupor with a baseball bat and mumbling like a zombie, will return from home and break down the room door with a baseball bat on the off chance you double crossed him or doubted his ability to uphold hotel standards. The building

breathes with tension and excitement. This is the hotel's favorite part of the day. With all its outside lights and internal artificial illumination the hotel is eager to play its part tonight.

11 PM: Clock in. Consult arrivals list. Prepare departures for tomorrow morning. Dispel internal fears about impending apocalypse. Every night could be the auditor's last. He never knows before he stands behind the desk. Every one of these guests could kill him. Every one of these guests could walk up and explode in a great geyser of gore all over the lobby entrance way, leaving him to mop it up (how does one mop up brain matter?) because the wifi lagged while the hotel was at full capacity. There are no expectations. There is only consideration for the worst possibility of everything. The auditor never doubts raw instinct. There is simply too much at stake. At some point he knows he will die. The auditor will be carried out into the sunlight and buried under the rosebush. The next night a new auditor will rise from the grave plot and adjust their tie and take his place. No matter what the desk will be manned. Without him the hotel is nothing. Every religion needs its priest. Every temple needs its sacrifice.

On Sweatpants

First, I didn't have any. COVID left me on the couch all day. Jeans are traditional work clothes. Much as they may have been my favorite pants, they were not conducive to the sudden forced sedentary lifestyle of the pandemic. I needed something with more comfort, and regular ole pajamas don't cut it in the daytime. Joggers were a new and specific goal. An avenue to break into, a route for my wardrobe to follow into the future. This doesn't mean that we were planning to permanently break away from what came before. Meanwhile I sat downstairs and scrolled through brand names I rushed to remember and prices I pushed out of mind. There was so much I couldn't afford. Of course the first were going to be cheap. The grey low-rise cost twenty dollars and did the trick. Try as we might to chase their aesthetic, the bravery and protection of designer clothing alluded us. The winter involved days with a grey slab around my hips with long lines to draw in wandering eyes like the slippery walls of a trap door pit. But spring would turn to summer and as loose as the ankles were I would never be able to breathe in them-let alone be outside in what were clearly clothes for the home-and a substitution needed to be found. The desire for protection remained. To be safe from a predator's vision and to attempt to re-integrate into the re-opening world wearing a brand that caught our eyes in the months preceding that sexual assault was an attainable goal. A clean sporty elevated aesthetic said I knew what I was doing and how I wanted to do it. I wanted black when I started looking and ended up wearing white because even second hand those sweatpants looked new and clean. And I was ready to feel clean.

Eighty dollars for something that could cost three hundred retail (and that you'd wear at least eighty times), from the hearty independent sports brand Stone Island. My celebration of the new experiment is christened with the cloth compass patch

attached to the new everyday “luxury sportswear” garment at the thigh pocket using two steel buttons bearing the loyal name. The cloth is soft and breathable but most importantly clean and devoid of marks save nearly-unnoticeable stretch-stress tears at the low end of the elastic ankle cuff from when a previous owner had put on their shoes too fast (I imagine, since I would exacerbate this injury doing this myself later on). Product description used the word “cargo.” Could we even call them cargo sweatpants if there’s just one extra pocket? There were other pockets, of course, in the usual places. The back pocket and the hand pockets of course worked with that same small zipper fasten, that goes without saying, but a spare pocket doesn’t describe the word “cargo” to the average listener. I fear the clean proportions and precise thoughtful construction—the change of fabric inside the thigh, the articulation, the strength of the drawstrings—could go the way side by focusing on this term. The plan was to integrate them into a larger burgeoning wardrobe. They would be clean without being stand-out, fitted without being tight, comfortable and lazy while being capable of motion. They were always going to be dirtied. That is the inevitable process of wearing clothing. But considering the environment I would shortly be subjected to, the woods and dirt and dust all around us, it’s no surprise they absorbed so much. Laundering them was a hassle, overthought and overwrought, a hand wash procedure that failed to return them to the original luster unpacked from a canvas bag. As careful as we wanted to be, old stains remained.. Considering we bought it second-hand—what choice did we have?— we did our best to maintain its condition. But time is cruel when it wants to be. Analogous to the passive suicidal ideation of a 25 year old who feels he’s lost everything, and has been thrust into an impossible situation, are the holes in the hem at the ankle. Cast in warm light, those sweatpants photographed well. Highlighting the ankle tears and the soft rural stains throughout the legs, the grey ash clinging

stubbornly to the thigh, I hoped. It wasn't long before they sold. That's what happens when you're reasonable with prices. The buyer lived in New York.

Stone Island has a store in New York. The doorman wears a suit. The door is locked from inside and the bag heavy on the shoulder with the burdens of a burgeoning life is left behind a glass window. The doorman tells me his store isn't responsible for my belongings, of course, but the bag is almost too heavy to be stolen no matter how much someone could look and see (if only they would look and see). The product inside is folded equally and organized by color. Neon green and bright orange. Black gets its own rack. A lookbook like a medieval tome splayed alive on a glass table. Warm grey steel and consistent bumpy music. Frosted glass and over-life-size model cutouts glance around the room. The attendants glow with anticipation. I touch any cloth I want because it is available. I am sweaty and broken and two hours away from being locked in with twenty other men in lawn chairs for the night. To be here is to fantasize. It's to reorient the history of steel facades and pop in a high end retailer on the ground floor. The streets are narrow and wiry. The people buzz with lust. Bags glisten in their hands. Eyes encased in glass flit from human to human and pivot to an approachable mode at a safe distance. The tone is always nice, because it is told to be. Anything but spending money is wasting time. And I went to waste their time. I went to see it and confront the advertising center in my brain. (In the end the ad men were left scratching their heads. How could I act like I "love" and "appreciate" these garments without buying them? They step back from the desk and light their pipes.) A fiction is settled as history. New sweatpants were there and I touched and felt them. The drawstrings go inside now. They did not come in white. Perhaps I dwelled on it too long, never lifting a tag to read it, the movement from place to place too calculated, a hunched gremlin somewhere you could never afford. The conversation then

becomes inevitable. I know I didn't look like I belonged there—my clothes were too shabby, the heat stuck to my forehead, I didn't have any sweatpants money—but for a moment I was connected to all of it. At some point I had worn these clothes. I was able to appreciate the details. The product grew narrative.

I wasn't waiting for a salesperson. Perhaps I greeted them or perhaps not (this is NY after all). But the sweatpants drew us there with magnetism. And that's when a salesperson asked, is there anything I can help you find?

—No. I'm just browsing.

Jimi & Miles: Live

This is how it happened, more or less. At some point on any musical journey it becomes inevitable that the listener will want to devour Jimi Hendrix. While staples like his “perfected” cover of Bob Dylan’s “All Along the Watchtower” (if I may use the originator’s own words of approval upon hearing the electric cry for freedom from that track) remain in regular rotation on every form of radio to this day, the majority of his discography consists of the three albums made with his backing band the Jimi Hendrix Experience. To say JHE changed the rock and popular landscape is to toss a pebble in an ocean. If it wasn’t for Jimi’s discoveries and unleashing of new vocabularies on the electric guitar, his refusal to treat an amplifier as a simple tool to make his instrument more audible and instead use fuzz and feedback and constantly craft innovative technique that would reflect on the musicians who followed his instrument till the end of time whether that be in rock or metal (often uncredited, something Jimi will be speaking of) or in his most favorite mode, the one the maestro never felt comfortable in, the one he wanted to approach but didn’t develop the bravery: jazz.

It comes as no surprise that Jimi Hendrix would like jazz. Anyone who notices the pops and licks and tonal shifts in his published music would do well to note their allegiances to introducing a blip of jazz vocabulary through the ear of a rock musician augmenting his craft. What Jimi said about jazz is few and far in-between. Especially before his untimely death at 27 his interviews focused on his drug and sexual exploits and the clothes he wore in increasingly flamboyant ways, another way his influence is often ignored on the musicians to come especially in the following decade (or two), and even the more serious journalists who wanted him to talk about guitar rarely brought up jazz perhaps out of fear of alienating an audience, imaginary

or real, who would contort at the idea of a jazz idiom in all its pompous posturing and intellectual pursuit and consistency. But these interviewers did a disservice to their audience. Not only is jazz a deeply rooted American art form that continues to push boundaries no matter what mode or genre its practitioners/explorers are placed under, but most importantly Jimi loved jazz. As someone who never learned to read musical notation, but was learning it, Jimi wanted to push his own boundaries, and perhaps gain a respect as a guitar player and serious musician that the pop world had forgotten to crown him in the midst of their sensationalist hype directed at his personal life in what we could later call paparazzi. Jimi Hendrix loved jazz because he loved music. And there was no other jazz musician active in his time that Jimi Hendrix loved more than Miles Davis.

Now Miles was at a crossroads. Far from a burgeoning talent releasing consistently innovative and inexplicably popular albums, Miles Davis was bored. Whether or not he wanted to admit it (there's very little Miles Davis will ever admit to, no matter how hard you drag it out of him) Miles Davis was tired of where he was. A long-time legend, he could trace his roots back several generations of jazz into its heyday. His collaborations are legendary. His technique, his voice on the trumpet, is distinct and (he'd say) unequal. By the time Jimi rolled around Miles wasn't getting rock 'n roll. Perhaps some part of him felt a form of competition, felt the pressure of the label execs who noticed how the loud adolescent rebellion turned intellectual arty psychedelic cultural milestone of rock'n roll had pushed jazz off the radio except for underground college stations and dedicated ones that played tracks and standards for years past. But Miles wanted to play new music.

He wanted to make an album with Jimi Hendrix.

Now how they got here is a bit of a winding road, but bear with me and we'll get there. As hesitant and outwardly dismissive as Miles was, something in his brain clicked when he heard Jimi play. "It was like a spark plug, man," he would tell me once, as we sat incognito in an East Village cafe, a neutral meeting point, him in the magenta suit he'd wear into the 90's and the face lining the dark shades he'd wear to his grave, and did. Didn't matter that we were inside, or the AC was on, or the coffee could get cold. Miles was talking and I better fucking listen.

"It's real simple, real simple." The hoarseness in his voice, the scars of overextending his palate and forever damaging his vocal cords, is legendary. Over the buzz of an eleven-in-the-morning (Miles is strict about his interviews. When he tells you to meet him at eleven you show up at ten fifty five with your coffee at the table. If Miles doesn't tell one of his tawny followers, the shifting servant apparitions, the tomb company that beckons on him, he'll probably ask you in a way that's polite and clear and you'd feel bad for not doing. SO do it. Get Miles Davis his coffee and show up early and be gracious that he's arrived at all) crowd he leans in closer eyes over the bridge of his nose locked dead set on me even as I scribble my notes I am compelled to look up always because his gaze doesn't wander. Miles is a hundred percent serious and you better fucking listen.

"I didn't dig rock n roll till I heard Jimi. The moment I heard that boy play I knew he was special. I knew I had to work with him."

So he tried to get Jimi. But by then Jimi was in the spiral. The excesses and the lack of trusted friends (rephrase) and the constant supply that stardom brings through the door ending up shutting that door forever on Jimi Hendrix. The fact that he died meant a great opportunity died with him. But Miles wouldn't stop inventing. As much as this heartbreak stirs some deep-seated

sadness in him, the kind Miles could never admit to but the keen observer would notice in lines across his face when sat across from him at an East Village cafe.

So Miles Davis never got to make a record with Jimi Hendrix.
And Jimi Hendrix never got to make a record with Miles Davis.

Until now.

Whether we can call it magic or fate or a new opportunity the chance for these two giants to form together and potentially change the face of music single handedly has returned. And only I, your dear narrator, could have had the opportunity to experience this coming together the likes of which 21st Century music has never seen.

“Being real,” the hoarse voice of Miles Davis said again, “this is a one and done thing.” I nod severely, much as his eyes drill into me, and I know I’m too curious and spongelike to match the determination burning through Miles Davis. “No tours, no press, none of that. Don’t go blabbing to your press friends about the big scoop or what-the-fuck.”

I tell Miles I work alone. I don’t have many press friends. And I wouldn’t tell a soul.

Miles tells me he’s not surprised. About what he doesn’t clarify. But his mouth slides into a smile, and flashes away.

Miles continues, “Any wind I hear about this getting out before it’s ready means game over.”

I tell him I understand.

“Jimi’s the” – Miles waits a minute to consider his word. –

“sensitive type. Any wind he catches on this could spook him. Good to keep in mind” –another pause– “he’s new to this thing.” This thing, of course, is hard to explain, let alone understand.

When earlier that week I’d received a phantom phone call, an unregistered number, I almost didn’t pick up. But something twinged in me, told me to, so I did. The voice was deep and warm and professional. Wanted to verify who I was and said a musician wished me to interview him and if I could meet later on this week. I pretended to look in my empty schedule and said yes. I asked if I could know who I’d be meeting, just so I could pick up relative information beforehand to keep from bumbling like a fool, and the voice on the line went quiet. A deep moment of pause.

“We’re asking you to meet with Miles Davis.”

And I stopped in my tracks. Miles Davis died before I was born! Was I being hoodwinked? The voice solemnly replied no. Miles Davis asked for me personally. If I wanted in on the new project I was to meet him at this cafe and be prepared to listen more than ask questions. I told them I’d let that be procedure and the line thanked me and hung up. So, I guess that was it. A phone call and a few days later I’m sitting across from Miles Davis at a cafe in the East Village, royal in his shades and suit and anonymous to passersby, close to thirty years after he died.

Miles Davis listens to the story of how I was, I suppose, chosen, with his great chin bobbing up his breakfast, the smile crosses his face again.

“How’s it feel to be chosen?” I was silent and he continued. “How’s it feel”--a gulp in his dry throat--“to know you have to do something that feels impossible?”

I sat and mulled over it but nodded anyway so Miles Davis wouldn't think I was an idiot or, worse, not listening.

"The desire burns in you," Miles said. "It can take you to your grave and meet you there."

Another small smile.

"It can even bring you back."

A bit of silence and English Muffin. One does not interrupt Miles Davis while he is eating. His appetite isn't unquenchable or ridiculous but his focus is paramount. To allow himself a moment to taste and chew and swallow through the dry ravages of his throat is to bring a clarity to things. Even in this admittedly confused situation sitting across from Miles Davis the comfort of food remained a stalwart of normalcy. He finished efficiently and cleaned with gusto: a wipe of a napkin across the mouth and a setting of silverware on the plate. Nothing was spilled. Nothing missed Miles before he had a chance to consume it.

He looked at me and blinked.

"So what we calling it?"

I mulled over a title for a long moment, then offered some up. Miles Davis with Jimi Hendrix. Jimi Hendrix Goes On For Miles. Stuff like that.

Miles didn't like any of it.

"We need more compromise."

I said I would want to find it.

“Let the kids know why it’s important, why this needs to happen, right there on the album cover.”

I didn’t ask why I needed to come up with an album title. In any other circumstance I suppose when a title is needed for an album it’s weighed and optioned and thought about throughout the creation cycle, until such a point that a word or a phrase falls into their lap, and it becomes the only thing that the record could possibly be called. But I was realizing why Miles wanted ME to come up with it. The album wasn’t ready yet. It hadn’t even started. By giving it a name we could bring it to life. By naming the album it could come true.

Miles was sitting back by now. A cigarette grew between his lips and his look angled down at the floor over a new pair of sunglasses, bigger and redder this time. The smoke grew out the tip and the fire burned small and fierce, but no smell, no sound, emanated from it. Somehow the cigarette was visible only to us. No other guest in this cafe acknowledged a clear health violation. Out of time, maybe, invisible. Sometimes they’d turn and acknowledge Miles and me, that half-second New York look that sizes us up, but no one said nothing about me talking to myself, or screamed at the site of a dead man, or did anything more about the toughs (Miles approved that word, by the way) standing in the background waiting for a beck or call. We were as isolated as we needed to be and not anymore. Miles didn’t hesitate to turn if a woman walked by. He was only as subtle as he wanted to be, with that, with this, with anything.

I don’t think he said much of anything as he left. Maybe at some point he got tired of me and just got up and walked out with his men in tow. But in a matter of a minute Miles Davis was gone again, and I was left sitting with a coffee still steaming but half-empty in an East Village cafe wondering what on earth I was

going to do next.

It took maybe a day to find the answer. The voice on the line was different this time, clearly a man, clearly a black man (I'm not one to distinguish between men of color like this, but the sound was too distinct, too mid-century, to be called anything else but capital-B Black), clearly someone in distress reaching out to me, of all people, once again, as a matter of last resort.

"I need to meet you where you met Miles."

"Sir, I'm sorry, I don't know what you're talking about."

"You sure do. Be there in twenty minutes."

And he hung up. And as harried as the voice sounded, as rushed as the sweat surely dripping from his eyebrow, on my way back to that same cafe I kept wondering where I knew that voice. And it hit me that I didn't know it from speaking. I had never heard that voice speak before. But I had heard it sing. It was the voice of Jimi Hendrix.

He came in alone. If I expected a hippie garb in the East Village, where a decade of renewed gentrification still wouldn't pass it by, I didn't get it. In fact it really wasn't until Jimi Hendrix sat down across from me, the table in a new spot, back corner, my back against a wall and my ass on a bench, that I recognized him. Because he hadn't aged a bit. If anything he was stuck in time. His wardrobe was updated. A simple t-shirt for the Velvet Underground, a distressed pair of black jeans, Converse high-tops he wore like brogues. His hair was a close shave, at most a 3 on the top. His beard, the goatee on that famous chin, remained. The cheeks were clean, the lines of bone under his flesh, the Indian silhouette in his blood, shone, even through the

nervousness and anxiety with which he collapsed at the table nearly tipping it over. I was holding onto my coffee and lent a hand to help Jimi Hendrix right the table through his myriad of mumbled apologies. He looked at me and immediately I felt the searching intensity of any photograph I'd ever seen. Whatever Jimi had come looking for he'd found. I smiled a little and he relaxed. I put down the coffee to shake his hand and he kind of looked at it, but simply said hi. In a post-covid world Jimi Hendrix was a germaphobe. You hate to see it.

So I asked him what the problem was and he started shaking his head. Ran his hands through his hair (a close crop but the twists wanted to run free) (modern: fade sides and puffy on top).

Finally said:

"Miles don't want to do it."

My face read incredulous, aghast. I asked why. And Jimi shrugged his bony shoulders, crossed his long legs under the table with all the elegance of a king.

"He doesn't have a title for it. He doesn't know what he'd want to play for it. He's still getting musicians for it. How we gonna play on the record together if we don't know what we're doing?"

I sat back a second, no more. How can a humble narrator tell Miles Davis to make the record of his dreams? There was no way I could put the trumpet to his mouth. There was no way I could jump in on drums. At most I could recommend songs. So that's what I told Jimi. Well, more or less, I asked him: what would YOU want to play? Blues? Dylan? Some new guitar tone you haven't found?

"I don't think you get me, man. I was TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS OLD when I died. Do you know how much more I wanted to do? Do you know the songs I wanted to play and hear and make? Do you think I enjoyed dying in a hotel bed choking on my own spit?"

I'd never seen or imagined Jimi Hendrix this mad. What could I say now? The easiest thing I could.

"Jimi, I'm 27. And I've wanted to die. But I didn't want to be dead either."

I don't know where his water came from but the paper cup was up to his lips and down at the table before I could recognize it. Of course, Jimi only drank water these days. But I guess I kept talking to Jimi Hendrix.

"Do you know how much I've thought about you? About how you became the greatest guitar player ever by starting off making your own from a dumpster and stretching a string to pluck it by ear? Do you know the biography I read out of high school and what it said? You always wanted to make music. So that's what I want to ask you. What do you want to make?"

That sly little smile returned. And for a moment he looked like Jimi Hendrix again. The wheels in his blessed brain turning.

"Did the biography tell you about that party I went to?"

"It talked about a lot of parties, Jimi."

"But what ones do you remember?"

"It's been a long time, Jimi."

“A lady came by once and said she made plaster casts of every famous man’s penis she saw. So she presents me in the middle of the room with this cylinder of gray putty, right, and tells me to put my dick in it. So I do!”

And the laughter starts. The warm memory.

“And so I put my dick in it.”

“Of course.”

“And it’s made FOR my dick! So I’m fucking it! And I’m fucking this cylinder pants down in the middle of the room everyone looking at me shocked and laughing and high off they mind and wide-eyed and everything and I’m just–”

He mimes the motion under the table. And laughs again.

“And I’m fucking it! And this lady looks at me HORRIFIED cuz I’m grunting like a PIG and says OH GOD JIMI DON’T CUM IN IT YOU’LL RUIN THE STATUE! So I pull out last second and shoot cum all over her fucking carpet!”

He hides his head in his hand. He’s still laughing. And I’ve joined in by now, even as restrained as I tend to be. But I have to laugh. Because I’ve retold this story before. It’s my favorite Jimi Hendrix story.

“I’m telling you, Jimi, you need to fuck this record up.”

His laughter recedes. He wipes the tears—it doesn’t hurt to see Jimi Hendrix cry, not like this—and he looks up at me.

“What am I gonna play on it?”

“You tell Miles you’re gonna play what you want. And he’s gonna follow your lead.”

And the boldness of my statement, the idea of Jimi going against the man who invited him on this project, shudders through him.

“Why would he? He’s MILES. He knows I don’t play any JAZZ or nothing like that. Why would Miles want to play with a rock guitar guy?”

“Because you aren’t a rock guitar guy. You’re Jimi Hendrix. What you play is irreplaceable.”

And I guess that did it, because immediately I get a call. I excuse myself and Jimi nods. The blood leaves his face. He knows who it is before I even pick up.

“Hello.”

“What in the fuck are you doing sitting with him.”

“Talking.”

“Don’t be talking about shit. Don’t be bringing up ANYTHING I did after he was in the dirt or this project is over.” I start to ask and Miles snaps back. “No. No questions. If it wasn’t for ON THE CORNER you would’ve never given a Miles job a chance, pale skin. I don’t give a FUCK that YOU liked it. Little black boys and girls was supposed to say, ‘yeah, I dig Miles Davis.’ And what the fuck good is that gonna do you?”

“It changed my life, Miles,” was all I said, and he huffed.

“Get your asses down here.”

Before I could ask where he hung up. Before Jimi could ask what Miles wanted a phantom black car pulled up—something so modern and anonymous I couldn’t pick it out of a crowd otherwise—and when I perked my head over Jimi’s shoulder to see what it was—I’ve been in New York long enough now to want to check on strange cars that pull up where I’m at—the driver laid on the horn. Jimi Hendrix shot around and sighed with all his breath.

“That’s us,” was all he said, and drained his water and I put my coffee down with the napkin over it (was I expecting to come back later?). And the horn didn’t stop till we stood up, and we walked out into the sun and the door opened, and Jimi got in first with all the grace of someone used to getting into cars that wait for him. The partition was up and the traffic was clear and the driver took a few turns and ended up on Fifth and pulled down a sidestreet I didn’t recognize and stopped curbside. The door opened and we stepped out and I almost said thank you but Jimi Hendrix grabbed my arm a little and rushed me alone through the revolving door and up a set of stairs to an anonymous door that popped out the wood-paneled wall and we were in a darkened space with a massive switchboard and computer screens flanking a set of revolving chairs and through a giant glass window was Miles Davis, alone on a higher chair than any in the studio, his trumpet perched in his hands, the organ that surprised me so much long ago waiting patiently beside him with the wires racing towards a plug in the wall. Miles pressed something in front of him and his voice boomed through the glass.

“Jimi, get your ass in here.”

The producer stood over the control deck and craned to look us over. Jimi looked from him to me to Miles, who pointed at a door off to the side, right in front of me actually, and Jimi gave me a solemn little nod and bowed his head through into the darkened space. A guitar and amp waited in the corner. The producer crossed his arms and leaned back, looked up at me, didn't say anything. The mike into the recording room stayed on. Under the harsh singular light trained directly on Miles' forehead a bead of sweat grew. His white shirt had its buttons undone to the chest and his sleeve rolled up. His finger shot at me.

"We're calling this record JIMI AND MILES: LIVE."

I nodded.

Jimi reached his guitar, put the strap over his right shoulder, plucked out a scale or two, and already I knew what he was.

Miles balanced his trumpet on his knee. I guess he asked if Jimi was ready because Jimi Hendrix nodded like a shy little kid. Miles' smile ached across his lips. The mike clicked on.

"Saint James' Infirmary." was all Miles Davis said.

Jimi smiled then and waited for his cue.

So Miles Davis blew a note. "Start there." Jimi, effortless, repeated it.

"Ready?" He asked into the room. The producer gave a thumbs up over the monitor. I stood there frozen.

Because then Miles Davis and Jimi Hendrix started to play. And it

was beautiful. It really was.